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Leader: Len P. Butt - Ph. No. 07 8483515

Asst: Brian Runnegar - Ph. No. 07 2861164

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The Normanby Ranges and its cycad

Vince Winkel who is an exceedingly knowledgeable horticulturalist has long been convinced that *cycas normanbyana* mentioned as being in the Normanby Range country, so when the opportunity arose, I was in the Bowen district doing a tour of lecture work among garden clubs, he arranged for a trip into its area. We headed out toward Collinsville early one morning to talk to a local garden club and this done headed toward the ranges. Vince described and named many of the *Eucalypts* on the way, a good dirt road, well maintained. As we progressed I noticed quite large clumps of *Cymbidium canaliculatum* high in *Eucalypts* beside the road too high for vandals and collectors. This country further in must have good populations of it. Further along we found large colonies of a *Xanthooreae* grass tree some being quite tall and even branching. Through well wooded country and sometimes actually along dry creek beds we travelled, viewing occasionally grass tree colonies but little else. After a long distance we turned through a fence and the dirt road deteriorated a bit, narrower gut still trafficable by 4WD actually now climbing the range, a series of up and down roads always higher and with steep gullies sometimes to each side. Just about 1 p.m., we sighted the first cycas growing beside the road, a stout trunked specimen, ash grey in caudex colour, with a good head of fronds. Here I noticed the uppermost ring of frond petioles was golden and that it persisted in splashing down the rachis. We moved on a few hundred metres, and came on to a few more in small clumpings also just back from the upper right side of the vehicle. Here I took measurements, of caudices, length of fronds and counted pinnae to a mature frond. Another stop and we stopped for a drink and a sandwich among the first side of road colony heading across the top of and down a gully. Very noticeable here, the fact that some were glaucous while most were green. One I climbed across to had a large megasporophyll of very large green seed on two to three to a sporophyll, which was slightly rusty tomentose one side, grey the other. The wedge shape of the appendage was small, tiny dentations on it and a large acute apical spine. The flattened top fronds were still gold coloured, the caudex about 2.3 metres.

Back to the car again and now from this point onward the colonies became almost commonplace and in one occasion only we actually found one with new young fronds erupting from the apex.

The colour being a most unusual ochre gold. Vince and I at least are now convinced this is the plant given the name *Cycas normbyana*. It is the only form in that area, is similar to *C. media* in some ways except for the golden hues. The ochre new fronds, the very large ovules which I presume only end up yellow/brown and these things alone make it not the normal *media*.

-Len P. Butt

*Lepidozamia Peroffskyana*



Vince Winkle with *Cycas*  
*Normbyana* - Normanby Ranges

Cycas Cairnsiana, the Mt. Surprise Gem.

This elusive species accredited to F. von Mueller was first described from material collected by G.E. Arnit from the Newcastle Range area. Since then it faded nearly into oblivion until the name was given erroneously to another cycad near Patford and west again to Chillagoe.

Some taxonomists were doubtful about this and expressed the opinion the naming was wrong and even that it might not still exist. During 1985 one of the members of the cycad/zamiad study group, Irene Champi A.S.G.A.P., native plant enthusiast and lapidary hobbyist, sent me the following notes after her usual wander in the Mt. Surprise gemfields.

The first encounter with this blue cycas, was in 1985 when a colony was discovered beside Lower O'Brien's creek amongst granite outcrops. All of these cycas colonies are on granite outcrops and mostly on hillslopes. The surrounding vegetation is mixed low open and grassy woodland containing *Acacia* spp. *Eucalypts* and the yellow flowered *Cochlospermum gregorii* which is quite common. I only noticed them in colonies and never as scattered individuals as is the general habit of other tree species in this area, which extends in various directions for about 10 km. Seed distribution may account for this, as there is no obvious difference between sites where they occur and those where they do not. *Callicarpa candicans* and *Phyllodium pulchellum* were also growing in these areas, There were a few specimens with a height of 3 metres from base to frond, Caudex diameter about 20 cm's no branching observed although suckering was found in one instance. Deeply keeled pinnae a vivid powder blue and Mega Sporophyllis having 3 to 6 ovules. Using this and other data taken at the time I gave the plant the temporary name of champion Blue Surprise in my booklet "Introduction to the genus cycas in Australia"

Further to this comes the latest data and information from Dr. Ken Hill Telopea 5 in 1992 and again from David Jones 1993, that this cycas is the true type *Cycas cairnsiana* long sought after and the wrong naming erroneously had been given to the Patford to Chillagoe species. Dr. Hill's data notes here stated collected also at the O'Brien Creek site, caudex 2 metres tall rarely to five fronds 60 cm to 110 cm long, strongly keeled in section (opposing pinnae inserted 30 - 90 degrees on the rachis with 180 - 280 pinnaerachis terminated by paired pinnae petiole glabrous 18 - 27 cm. long)

Unquote .....

Pinnae observed by all taxonomists, narrow and strongly recurved, these appearing crowded but evenly distributed on the rachis. Interesting to note that similar colony in the forsyth area had wider pinnae. Male cones 20 cm's + 10 cm. narrowly ovoid. Female megasporophylls, loose open and

heavily covered with white bloom, and many loose brown hairs. Ovules though yellow when mature thickly covered with pale blueish bloom. Young fronds in the crown white to pale blue. Habitat information is . . . . . tropic climate with usually wet summers, winters dry, night temperature around 8 c., rainfall approx. 600 mm per annum.

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### *Cycas Sylvestris*

For several years up till now, there has come into commercial prominence *Cycas* from the islands around the top of Australia, with much wider, thinner pinnae, and a much faster growth rate in cultivation than is evident in Australian species. From Sri-Lanka and parts of India we get *Cycas circinalis* from Singapore, *C. rumphii*, and islands down from the Philippines across to New Guinea and the Solomons, some few others all bearing some affinity to the *circinalis* pattern.

It follows that when the news broke that Ken Hill had searched for, found, and described such a *cycas* near the eastern tip of Cape York all these hopes came to fruition. From Dr. Hill's notes comes the evidence this had been sighted as far back as 1974, but in 1992 it was examined and described. The latin name emerging *Cycas sylvestris* (from the forests). Here at long last a *circinalis/rumphii* type and occurring in Australia. The habitat described by Ken Hill is the Queensland Cook district on the eastern coast of Cape York Peninsular on each side of the Olive River, and with some occurrences south to the Pascoe River.

The area is thickly forested with both rainforest and near the sand dunes has a *melaleuca* predominance. The soil in that area is whiteish grey silicieous sand the species occurring also among the sand dunes.

Although their would appear some affinity to *rumphii* and *circinalis* Hill's description places also an affinity to *C. media*.

Quoting direct from Hill, *Telopea* (5 number 1) distinguished from other Australian species by the broader and relatively thinner adult pinnae, the broad falcate pinnae and the non-pectinate megasporophyll apex with a distinct apical spine - unquote).

This species also differs from its pacific island cousins by having strong spiny petioles in its seedling plants. Described also as having a caudex height of 3 to 4 metres with an average thickness of 15 cm's., the emerging young apical fronds being pale green to grey being densely tomentose, the cataphylls

thin to 30 cm's. long. Width of nature pinnae being 9 to 15 mm's., (comparison circinalis 9 to 13 mm., length of frond 100 to 200 cm's. pinnae to frond from 90 to 150. Length of seed 30 to 35 mm's. smallish seed.) No spongy layer to seed as similar plants do have. Seeds ovoid yellowish up to 10 to the megasporophyll. David Jones mentions this species also differs from other broad pinnaed by not having the large floating water dispersed seeds as are present in *Circinalis* and *rumphii*. The seed of course is smaller also. The climate is hot humid and tropical, best grown in tropics or at least sub-tropic coast in sandy well drained loam (alluvial sand) full sun when mature but some shade earlier. Suspect frost tender.

- L.P. Butt